

TEMPORAL MEANINGS AND FLEXIBLE SPACES IN TOKYO

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This paper examines the role played by religious space in modern Tokyo. Much of the discussion focuses on the temporal meanings of space in Japan and how this interacts with the Japanese perspective on historic preservation.

Bounded by a mountain range and the ocean, Tokyo occupies an intensely developed pocket of land. With 12.5 million residents in Tokyo proper and approximately 35 million in Greater Tokyo, it is the most populous metropolitan region in the world. That population lives at an incredibly high density of 5,655 people per square kilometer. For a city of this size, however, Tokyo has a relatively short history. Although the village that preceded Tokyo was founded in the twelfth century, Tokyo did not become the capital or a major city until 1603. Additionally, the firebombing of Tokyo during World War II destroyed most of the city's physical structures. As a result, the city of today consists largely of modern structures built in the last 50 years.

As the commercial and governmental center of Japan, much of Tokyo appears ultramodern, with high-speed rail lines, electronic billboards, and the accoutrement of technology everywhere. Yet, nestled within the towering buildings and rushing trains lie many artifacts of traditional Japanese culture and architecture. These temples, graveyards, and shrines form a surreal landscape interwoven with the modern urban infrastructure. The presence of these spaces raises the following questions regarding the form and culture of Tokyo:

- How do religious and historic spaces fit into an ultra-modern megacity like Tokyo?
- How do the Japanese reconcile these disparate forces in the city?

Japanese cities generally lack distinct public spaces in the Western sense, with large, open squares or other spaces for gathering. Instead, the Japanese often utilize dense urban spaces for multiple purposes, with the meanings of physical space changing depending on the context. This analysis will address the previous questions by examining the cultural and physical qualities that shape the distinctly complex form of Tokyo. In order to ground this discussion, we will study how these common themes apply to the specifics of Senso-ji, a famous temple site in Tokyo, and its festival activities. Although some of the Japanese perspective on space comes from its unique cultural and religious background, much of the shape of the modern Japanese urban environment has come from a practical need to accommodate high densities and varied needs for public spaces. This approach has the potential to teach the West lessons on how to create flexibility in our own complex urban future.

MIXED USES

As noted in the introduction, Tokyo has many mixed elements in its urban form, with serene gardens and temples alongside bustling shopping districts and towering office buildings. Nowhere is this contrast more evident than on the grounds of the Imperial Palace, which lies in the traditional center

of Tokyo, amidst the central business district. Due to its location, the Palace has the world's highest real-estate value, but most of the property remains inaccessible to the public except on a few days of the year. The idyllic gardens, historic buildings, and moat all stand in sharp contrast to the busy office buildings of the surrounding business district. This contrast is common in Japanese cities, but it is especially pronounced in Tokyo due to the high density of development. Despite the high density and land values, these religious and traditional spaces remain within the city. In the case of the Imperial Palace, this is probably because the Emperor is not subject to the same Japanese laws and influences, but for many spaces, their place in city life is not immediately clear to the foreign viewer.

The long-held Japanese tradition of using spaces for multiple uses may set a precedent for the modern city. These mixed uses are visible in a number of formats. Most clearly relevant to this discussion are the multi-religious functions of many temples in Japan. Temples frequently serve both Buddhist and Shinto purposes. Often a Buddhist temple has a Shinto shrine attached or both services occur in the same space, varying based on the date and the type of worship. This adaptation of use depending on time and necessity is common in Japan. Another example is the traditional Japanese room. In a land with limited private space, these rooms have a flexible design to accommodate a variety of purposes. Fred Thompson describes this flexibility well in his article "Japanese Mountain Deities:" "A Japanese room, for instance, can be used simultaneously for living, sleeping and eating, and is called an eight mat *ma*." (Thompson 1997, 82). The mats refer to the different placements possible for eight different uses.

PUBLIC SPACES

This mixed use of spaces in Japan, particularly Tokyo, seems to derive partly from the density of development, which limits the availability of space. Another consequence of high densities is that people live very public lives. Because private space in the home is limited, residents of Tokyo spend much of their time in public, whether working, eating, shopping, reading, relaxing, or simply walking down the street. Describing this public life in "Japan on the Edge," Catherine Slessor writes, "People tend to live their lives in public: in cafés, bars and restaurants, in shopping malls, parks and temples (even the unabashed love hotels fulfill an essential function). This animated and inhabited public realm generates a strong sense of community and encourages social cohesion." (Slessor 2001, 44). In addition, the density means that time spent in public is usually spent in constant contact with other people.

Surprisingly, despite this public life, Japanese cities lack large public spaces in the Western tradition, and foreigners often view them as lacking a center or distinct focal point. Slessor notes this distinction and identifies religious spaces as fulfilling the traditional roles of Western public plazas: "Historically, there is no Japanese tradition of large urban spaces comparable to the civic squares and piazzas of Europe. Public activities were held in Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, and more importantly, on the streets. These were the setting for the events, festivals and activities of daily life." (Slessor 2001, 43). The important point to recognize is the association of space with activities. Thompson points out that the Japanese conception of public space is much more amorphous than that of the West, viewing this realm as "kaiwai, or an activity space." (Thompson 1997, 82). Like the usage of temples, this activity space "changes with the activities of its users and their intentions." (Thompson 1997, 82) and is not defined by its physical features. Similarly, as Slessor noted, the street becomes an important part of this activity space, by linking private and public space and transforming from day to day depending on the need.

The importance of the street as activity space also arises from its role in a common use of public space in Japan: religious festivals. Temples frequently have festivals associated with them that occur throughout the year. During these periods, streets are closed off and transformed into part of a procession route, through which crowds of people move toward and through religious space. An example of this in Tokyo is Sanja Matsuri, the spring festival associated with Senso-ji temple that will be discussed later. An interesting aspect of Japanese festivals is their integral motion and direction, which makes them more like a parade than a Western-style public gathering.

These processional spaces make Japanese religious environments distinct from Western urban spaces. Although Japan does not have squares and plazas as in many Western cities, Thompson notes that:

Japan does have great temples and shrines, which are, in many ways, equal in scale and grandeur to Western architecture. There are also great open spaces in front of and around buildings; yet, as Itoh Teiji points out, these spaces were to be experienced by moving through them rather than by viewing them from a fixed vantage point: “Sequential spaces”, he says, “may be understood as a distribution of memories of the experience, noting that the content of memory includes not only the beauty of physical space, but also the story, or legend concerning the elements along the path.” (Thompson 1997, 83).

These sequential spaces reflect the multiple uses associated with spaces and the temporality of meanings associated with these changes.

TEMPORAL MEANINGS OF SPATIAL FORM

The multiple activities associated with public and private spaces in Japan highlight the temporal meanings imbued in urban forms. At one moment a room could be the living room; the next it could be a bedroom. Similarly streets can switch from busy shopping corridors to religious processions at a moment's notice. This lack of fixed meanings comes partly as a result of the dense living environment of Japanese cities, but it also results from cultural perspectives on life and meaning. Thompson beautifully describes this perspective in the following passage: “The public spaces are streets rather than a central square because the Japanese perception of street and private spaces is a part of an integral space-time continuum or *ma*. Life is seen as a process of ebb and flow, rather than a series of events; it changes metamorphically just as nature does from season to season, age to age, birth to death, in endless rhythms of renewal.” (Thompson 1997, 82). This perspective helps explain how religious spaces and activities can fit into the urban fabric in apparent contrast to the everyday uses and meanings of space.

This understanding stems partly from Buddhist philosophy, which regards life and its trials as temporary and emphasizes the connectivity between all elements. Buddhist philosophy takes shape not only in use of activity spaces but also in traditional Japanese architecture. Though famous for its serene sense of order, traditional Japanese design also focuses on the relationships between design elements and flexibility for infinite possibilities. In *Form and Space in Japanese Architecture*, Norman Carver eloquently elucidates these principles:

Of all the principles discernible in Japanese architecture, the most visible is the pervasive sense of order. It is an order so thorough and yet so innately flexible and energizing that its integration of the inherent complexities of form and space

appears almost effortless.... Perfection of a system of asymmetrical order may be Japan's most significant contribution to architecture. For, in contrast with symmetry, the inherent vitality of asymmetry requires participation in the experience of form—by suggesting, by directing the mind to complete the incomplete, and by providing a constant source of ever-changing relationships in space. Asymmetrical order is not an externally imposed finality, but an extension of the process of life. Asymmetry recognizes that life is not static or perfectible, but that its essence is growth, change, relatedness. (Carver 1993, 27).

These principles clearly inform the arrangement and use of public space in Tokyo, allowing for a diversity of uses without contradiction.

SENSO-JI

A famous example of flexible religious space in Tokyo is Senso-ji temple. Supposedly constructed in the late seventh century, Senso-ji enshrines a statue of the bodhisattva Kannon, which according to legend was found in the river by two local fishermen. Located in the central district of Asakusa, the temple serves multiple purposes. It is a popular destination for both international and Japanese tourists, the site of a vibrant marketplace, and the focal point of the boisterous Sanja Matsuri. In addition to the central Buddhist temple, there is an attached Shinto shrine, the Asakusa Shrine, dedicated to the two fishermen who found the statue and the village chief who constructed the temple.

The temple complex is laid out with a long arcade, the Nakamise-dori, leading from the entrance to the central temple. On most days this arcade is lined with merchant stalls selling a variety of traditional handicrafts and tourist souvenirs. Following tradition, this site is designed for procession rather than static observation. The intention is to move pilgrims through the arcade and past the temples and shrines. During the Sanja festival, the processional nature is enhanced by temporarily closing the streets surrounding the complex and the shops on Nakamise-dori.

The festival draws thousands of visitors and participants, who move through the streets carrying and shaking *mikoshi* (portable shrines) combined with lots of shouting and applause. After movement through the crowded local streets, the shrines are carried through the temple complex and displayed before the Asakusa Shinto Shrine. After the three-day festival, the temple reverts to its nominal usage. Interestingly, located with the densely developed Asakusa district, this site provides both a valuable public activity space and a prime example of superficially conflicting modern and traditional spaces.

CONCLUSION

Although religious spaces appear to sharply contrast modern development within Tokyo, a deeper analysis reveals the integral role that these activity spaces play in the public lives of Tokyo's residents. The disparate forces of the traditional and the modern in Tokyo appear to reconcile themselves as a function of both high densities and cultural attitudes. A recognition and acceptance of the temporality of meanings and spatial needs allows for flexible use of limited spaces. Through this perspective on physical space, Tokyo has emerged as a unique city, seamlessly blending seemingly disparate elements by adhering to traditional design standards concerned with flexibility and relationships rather than fixed meanings and static protection.

The model seen in Tokyo has a number of interesting implications for development. The city has successfully connected the formal, static infrastructure and built environment of the city with the more informal uses of everyday life and special occasions, such as festivals. This is achieved by allowing for flexibility in the usage of streets and public areas in city codes and regulations. This strategy of recognizing multiple uses is particularly useful in dealing with changes occurring as a result of development and globalization. As change comes, this approach allows for simultaneous occupation of space, which permits the city to adjust more smoothly and allows the informal to cope with change.

The West could take some lessons from the Japanese experience. As property values increase in American and European cities and urban populations continue to grow, Western cities will feel more pressure to increase density and make more dynamic use of urban public spaces. Large public squares only used at certain times of the day or year could be reconceived to contain a multitude of meanings and uses, maximizing their potential to serve the public all day and all year. Similarly, designers of new buildings or public spaces may allow for greater flexibility and adaptability. The strongest lesson derived from the experience of Tokyo, however, is how an evolving city can preserve its cultural and architectural heritage in the face of the seemingly hostile forces of modernization and growth. By keeping an open mind regarding the purpose of public space and a willingness to allow the outward juxtaposition of forms, one can form a more complex blend of the old and new, creating a continuously intriguing and livable city, like Tokyo.

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